

3 Bicycles and other machines

Light, of course, always has possessed a numinous, symbolic significance. 'I am the light of the world' says Jesus, for example, in St John's Gospel, and in common clichés it resonates: 'Let's shed some light upon this' is a significant cliché. Goethe's attributed last words ('Mehr Licht!', More light) give us all pause. What, though, about the numinous in something ordinary? What, for example, about bicycles? What follows are notes I made after an exciting session with children and bicycles in a lovely school called Tacolneston, Norfolk.

I didn't begin with the bicycles. They were there, in the classroom, one at each end, among the displays of paintings and the bookshelves. I'd upended them, or at least two girls on work experience from the local high school had upended them. This made them look unfamiliar. This is important when you want to draw something, or write about it. How you see a sink, or a chair, or a table – or a bike – every day will not help you very much to make your drawing, or your poem, or your description. Deep down you think, I've seen this, I know what it's like, it's like this, and you reproduce the familiar image as you familiarly see it.

This is especially true of children and bicycles, because most children ride them easily, and often see their friends riding them. This causes them to draw what they expect to see, not what they actually see. Of course, they don't draw accurately; they draw, instead, a casually made symbol of what they know about, of what they are familiar with. They get it, not so much wrong, as bland. When you draw the familiar as it is familiarly seen, you are not truly engaged with it. The large sweep of the thing – two wheels, handlebars – is all right, both in the sense of accuracy and in the sense of engagement, but the details (and, notoriously, the god is in the details) are missing, or casually sketched, rather than examined till it hurts, and then striven over. The chain will be muddled in vaguely, and so will other crucial elements, like the brakes, the brake handles and the chain wheels.

But turn the bicycle upside down and the very strangeness of the altered image makes you look at it freshly. You have less excuse for casually, or even carelessly, putting the expected image on the paper.

Anyway, I began, not with the subject, bicycles, but with the media, with the paper and pencils. I gave all the children – aged seven years to eleven – a scrap of paper and asked them to cover it 'with as many different pencil marks as they could think of'.



3 Children and bikes (1)



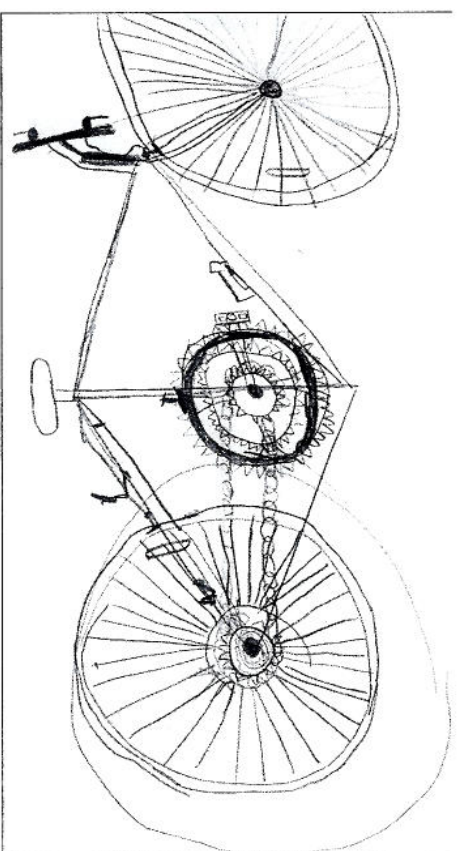
4 Children and bikes (2)



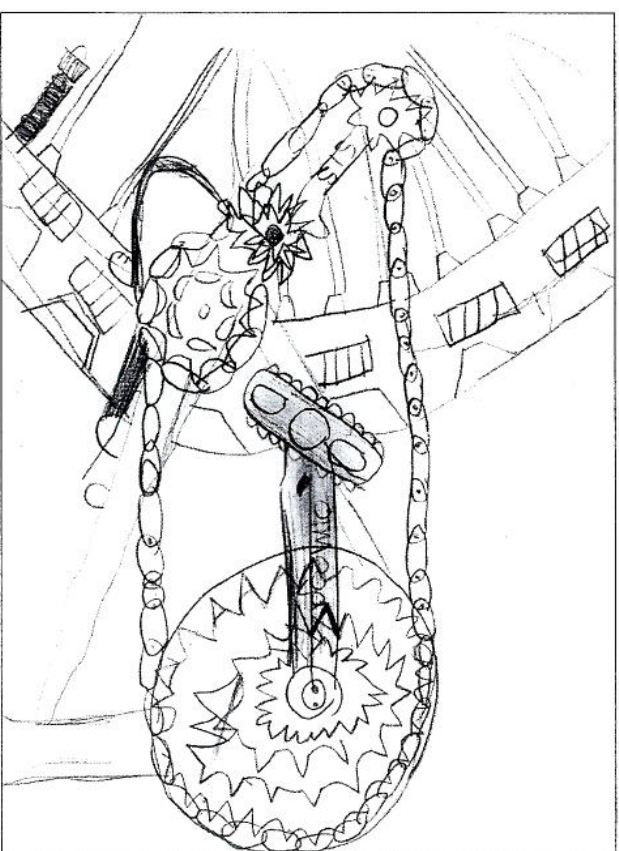
5 Child's scribbles

Then I asked them to draw part of one of the bicycles. But I gave them four rules. They are, for me, general principles for all drawing:

- **No erasers.** There are three reasons for this. First, erasers waste time. I have watched many children over the years worrying at a sentence or a sketch with an eraser, rather than with their imagination, thus using up time when they could be learning. Second, they encourage children to think in terms of a photographic image of perfect accuracy, rather than an image that engages the viewer. Third, they often rub out wrong lines that are interesting. I show children Alberto Giacometti's drawings, which are notable for the multiplicity of their lines.
- **Do the drawing close up.** This prevents the children making drawings that are so small that their meanings are obscured. It is a better way of putting it than 'Do it big' because it enhances the quality of the looking.
- **Use your pencil in all the different ways you have used it on those scraps of paper.** This empowers the drawings by giving them variety and depth. It surprises the children when you first suggest it, but it guarantees a sudden improvement in all their drawing. In a school that uses this technique as a matter of course at the beginnings of all the school years, the children draw more effectively than in other schools.
- **Look, look and keep on looking.** When they are young children need to be taught that one look at what they are drawing is not enough. They need to keep checking, to keep re-establishing their relationship with their subject.



6 Child's drawing of a bike (1)

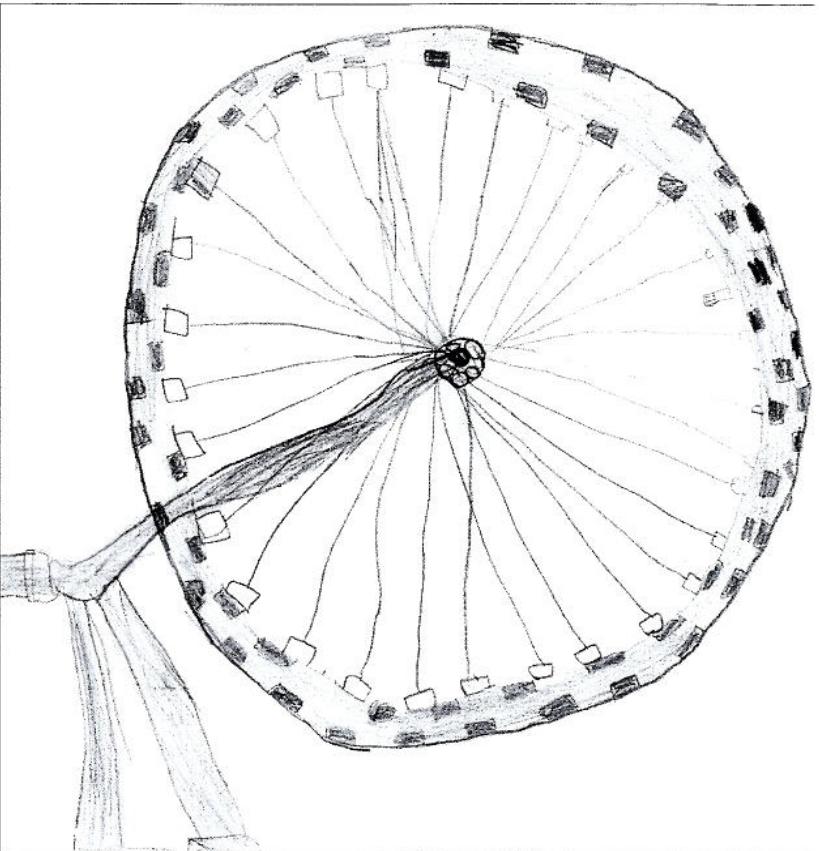


7 Child's drawing of a bike (2)

Here are some of the children's drawings. These drawings, and the ensuing conversations and writing, taught me yet again an old truth, put succinctly here:

'Children who learn to look, learn to question, to discover, to understand ... Looking absorbs, engages, calms and sensitizes the learner ... Art is a way of looking, seeing, questioning and discovering ...'

Newland and Rubens 1984



8 Child's drawing of a bike (3)

I also asked the children to listen to the bicycle. We all sat on the carpet, and I spun the wheels, while the children sat with their eyes closed and covered with their hands, listening to the ticking noise. I asked them what it sounded like, what it reminded them of, and we wrote down their words.

They began to write:

The brakes slither out of the handles like snakes.
 The cogs for the chain
 are waves at a standstill.
 The spokes are jail bars in a cold dark cell.
 The wheel turns into a mirror unexpectedly.
 The frame reminds me of Snoopy with a pedal eye.
 The bike is a muddle of letters.
 O is the wheel
 C is the handle.
 P is the back part of the frame.

V is the pedal
 linked on to a cog.
 L are brakes.
 U is the chain.
 D is the wire crossing.

Ellie (11)

This writer showed extraordinary vividness in her images. Note especially the spinning wheel as a mirror, and the brakes 'slithering out of the handles like snakes'. The comparison of parts of the bicycle with letters of the alphabet shows another skill that writers need to develop – a playfulness. This writing is full of both metaphor (note especially 'the cogs of the chain / are waves at a standstill') and simile.

The reflectors spin and whirl
 while the spokes disappear
 into a new dimension.
 The chain sounds like a train
 clacking over a track.
 The frame is keeping the gears together.
 The gears are like

sets of eyes
 watching where I ride.
 As I change gear
 it moves around and around.
 A new ride is coming

on each gear.
 The chain sounds like
 the rain stick in music.

Then suddenly
 I hit the kerb.
 My bike trips suddenly
 My helmet took the fall ...
 My arm is in a cast
 for three weeks.

The spokes of my bike shimmer in the sunlight.
 My bike makes me free
 in a world of freedom.

Danielle (11)

The rain stick reference stemmed from the fact that there was one of these musical instruments in the classroom, and we had played with it; then I had read the children Seamus Heaney's poem 'The Rain Stick', from his book *The Spirit Level* (Faber and Faber 1996), and played a recording of the poet reading the poem himself. Classrooms where interesting, strange, surprising objects are on display are classrooms where lines like this get written. 'The spokes disappear / into a new

dimension' is a daringly original idea. This writer had had an accident on her bicycle, and her arm was still bound up. This lesson gave her the opportunity to bring the story of her accident into the lesson.

When the pedal goes down it looks like a chequered flag starting a car race.
 The reflector slithers through the spokes.
 The chain is like a conveyor belt moving fast fast fast.
 The sound is like a clock ticking and then speeding up.
 The spokes look like they're going down a whirlpool and coming back out.
 The cogs look like the mouth of a dragon eating its chain.

Mathew (9)

The bike looks like
 a pair of
 glasses on the work.
 The top of the pedal looks like
 a doormat
 that has had a lot
 of muddy shoes wiped on it.
 The spokes make me think
 of when I'm roller skating.
 The orange reflectors
 are the colour
 of my mum's orange jelly.
 The noise of the chain
 is like a rattlesnake
 also
 the noise of chain is like a bell.
 When the wheel is going fast
 if you lightly
 put your hand on the wheel
 you see muck or sand or dirt
 popping up and down.

The next writer gave his poem an appropriate title: 'Objects Connected':

A large object,
 Connected by a chain,
 Turns to a small object,
 Connected by a chain,
 Small object turns a wheel,
 Connected by a chain,
 Large object turned by a pedal,
 That's connected to the large object,
 Connected by a chain,

To the small object,
 Turning the axle,
 Connected to the spokes,
 Turning the wheel
 Makes the bike go faster
 Connected to the ground.

Giuliano (10)

Here again the drawing and the poem inform each other. The writer's use of the repeated word 'connected' has been encouraged by the experience of making the line on the picture, and vice versa.

Bits of a bike

The wheel is like a life cycle
 going round and round again.
 The reflector is like a burning fire
 flaming in the night.

The wheel is like a wave
 rolling on the sand
 on a summer's morning.

The wheel sounds like rain
 falling on to the pavement ...

The spokes look like they disappear then reappear like a ghost.

The pedal is a butterfly
 spinning round and round.

Lauren (11)

A note about the broader curriculum

In these days when we have to justify every minute a child spends in a classroom, we should ask: What are the children learning as they study the bicycles with their ears, eyes and hands? We can make six strong answers to this question.

First, they are learning mathematics as they look at geometric shapes, especially triangles and circles, and as they count spokes in order to draw them accurately. Second, they are learning science: physics of course, such as how chains and brakes work in general; and they are learning technology, the application of that science for bicycles in particular. Third, they are learning something about their bicycles as a means of transport, and therefore it is not far-fetched to suggest that this work contributes to their safety on the road. Fourth, they are learning about language, and the subtleties of it when it is required to describe something with accuracy. Fifth, they are learning about poetry, and the use of similes and metaphors and other figures of speech; about the little-known fact that poetry is about the

workings of bits and pieces of our lives, as much as daffodils and clouds, and how language can be beautiful even when the subject matter is as down-to-earth as their bicycle. And sixth, they are learning about art and its ability to tell us the truth about things: that every line is a line into knowledge. They are learning, too, that art can be aesthetically pleasing and vigorous when it is not concerned with obviously lovely things like flowers and clouds; that what Rupert Brooke, in his poem 'The Great Lover' (Brooke 1932:134), called 'the keen / Unpassioned beauty of a great machine' has its charms, too.

Once, I did something similar with my car engine. It was still at first, then I turned it on. It excited this writer:

An elephant's trunk withdraws from an ice bucket.

The elephant is very gritty.

Four grass snakes crawl into a cardboard box.

When he revs the car up, the snakes nearly knock the box over.

When the engine was turned on, the snakes were frightened.

They were shaking.

There was a dead snake at the back.

His head had been burnt off.

Anon (11)

The ferry on the Broads

Sometimes, teachers and children are lucky enough to see and hear a machine that is out of the common experience of most of us. One day in the summer of 1999, on my travels as a jobbing poet, I noted that there was a shorter route to the little school that had booked me in for a day than the way I had planned. The village is on the Norfolk Broads, and I drove confidently towards it, cutting off a huge triangle with Norwich at one corner and the Norwich–Yarmouth A47 by-pass at one side – and found myself facing a ferry.

The great clanking thing had space on it for three cars, and I had enough money in my pocket – just over two pounds – to pay the ferryman, and sufficient time to not be late. The mechanics, the noisy, oily facts of the matter, chains, steering wheels and clanking ramps – competed in my mind with the symbolism. Where do ferrymen take us, traditionally? I thought of the ferryman in Greek mythology, carrying the dead across the River Styx into Hades.

An hour later, in the school, I asked the children to describe their ferry, pointing out first that it was an unusual possession, and that the friends I had met on my travels in Stevenage, Ipswich, Bishop's Stortford, Durham and other places would be surprised – and impressed – to experience one. I told them about the ferry in Cornwall that I knew – bigger than theirs, but less impressive in some ways, because, I think, of their ferry's intimacy. I talked about my experience that morning – about the panic, about driving on to what I thought looked like a steel road; about how much care I took. I talked about the chains I could see, about how I kept testing that my handbrake was on, because of the illusion that the car, not the ferry, was moving.

I said that in their writing the word 'like' would be useful, in its simile-introducing mode, and that I wanted to see some careful descriptions of the sounds the ferry made as it crossed the little river, and also of effects the ferry made on the water. What did it make the water look like, for example? What did the chain resemble, or remind them of? The wheels, the cogs?

For once the children had ready access to word-processing facilities, and to the expertise of a teacher. Also there was a parent who could type properly (unlike me, who types with two fingers), and when the children tired of the keyboard, she took over. The children watched their poems grow on the screens in front of them. This flexibility in the use of word processors seems to me to be as important as it is rare. Often I see impressive computer suites in schools, but they rarely seem to be used to compose poems, stories or reports. In other words, one of their primary functions, word processing, is almost completely neglected. Ideally, each classroom should have three or four computers available when the children are writing so that they have some experience in composing with them. As I said in the Introduction, the facility that these machines have to change the order of words, sentences and stanzas at the touch of a couple of keys actually makes thinking more flexible. Pens and pencils have a more tactile feel, and it would be sad if the next generation forgot the pleasure of using them. But computers have a pedagogic function in writing, and we sell our children short by not giving them access to them.

We printed their poems in little editions of three: one for the writer, one for the publisher, and one for the visitor, me.

The ferry is like a plank of wood floating in the sea.

I hear the chains. They sound like click click or ch ch ch.

I feel calm not scared.

I always know everyone enjoys the ferry from the smile when they come off.

The river jumps on to the ferry.

The person on the ferry looks out for boats.

It moves very slowly.

It makes the river part into small waves.

The chains move around a wheel

and pull the ferry from one side to another.

In summer huge queues come.

In winter there are no cars.

You can't swim in the river

or you will drown.

Sarah (8)

The chains creak the cogs,

moan,

the noise is like a car starting.

The water crashes on the hull.

It moves slowly but I don't mind.
The cabin is very small but the driver can fit in.
Levers buttons and cogs alike
are all inside the cabin.
The chains are creaky moving like an old granny getting up.
Two motors work their hardest trying to get the old chug a bug moving.
They always manage in the end ...

Stuart (9)

... The water has circles in it that grow bigger and bigger when you throw a stick into it.
In the old days 6 men pulled the chains across the river
but now they have electricity ...

Sarah (10)

When you look down from your car you can see the chains.
The chains make a creaky sound.
They remind me of the sounds in our diesel minibus.
The cabin is small but the driver manages.
Once the driver short-changed my Nanny ...
Sometimes there are big queues. In the time you could run into the pub and get a drink ...
There are little splashes of water where the ferry had been ...

Anon (9)

Notice here the children's casual observation: 'I always know everyone enjoys the ferry from the smile when they come off'; 'It makes the river part into small waves. There are little splashes of water where the ferry had been ...'

4 Cats and other animals

'If at night your eye is placed between the light and the eye of a cat, it will see the eye look like fire'

Leonardo da Vinci

'He moves slowly and softly/a little bit at a time'

Anon (5)

For some reason, cats and poetry seem to be related. Look at this wonderful extract from a longer poem by Christopher Smart. It can be found in many anthologies, including *The Rattle Bag* (Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes 1982) and my own *Jenny Kissed Me* (2000d):

For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry.
For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him.
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.
For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.
For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.
For he rolls upon prank to work it in.
For having done duly and received blessing he begins to consider himself.
For this he performs in ten degrees.
For first he looks upon his forepaws to see if they are clean.
For secondly he kicks away behind to clear away there.
For thirdly he works it upon stretch with the forepaws extended.
For fourthly he sharpens his paws by wood.
For fifthly he washes himself.
For sixthly he rolls upon wash.
For seventhly he fleas himself ...
For eighthly he rubs himself against a post.
For ninthly he looks up for his instructions.
For tenthly he goes in quest of food ...